

African American History and Culture: A Grassroots Interpretation of Culturally- Relevant Teaching for Academic Achievement and College Access

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Abstract

The Achievement, Confidence and Excellence (ACE) Academy in Memphis is a partnership involving the University of Memphis, its Benjamin Hooks Institute for Social Change, and three area school districts. ACE operates as a Saturday Institute, serving three hundred seventh to twelfth grade African American students. Grounded in culturally relevant pedagogy, the Academy's curriculum uses African American history to facilitate high school students' mastery of traditional academic subjects and increase their desire to achieve at higher levels in school and to continue on to college.

Over the next two decades, America will experience a demographic shift in its school-age population. Students of color made up 40 percent of the nation's school population in 2004 and are projected to make up almost half by 2020, a trend that will be mirrored in the U.S. population as a whole by the mid-twenty-first century (Pallas, Natriello, and McDill 1989).

The increasing diversity of the nation's students has not, however, been reflected in increased teacher diversity. In 2005, 83 percent of the teachers in U.S. classrooms were white (NCES 2007). In addition, the curriculum is still largely Eurocentric, which ignores the experiences, voices, contributions, and perspectives of non-dominant groups (Banks 1993; Loewen 2008). Such curricula privilege white students by validating their cultural history at the expense of the history and culture of other races and cultures which, in turn, it has been argued by many, negatively impacts the achievement of students of color (Asante 1991/1992). Kester (1994) argued that positive school outcomes for African American students would be enhanced if more elements of their communities and culture could be incorporated in the school curriculum.

This mismatch between teacher and student demography and imbalance in the cultural dimensions of the curriculum contributes as well to differences in the achievement scores and college attendance of students of color which consistently lag behind majority white students. For example, even though the Memphis City School district met its federal benchmark in the academic subjects, the "TDOE [Tennessee

Department of Education] Report Card” (2007) indicates an achievement gap between African American and white students; they are below proficiency in every subject area and at every school level.

To illustrate, in mathematics at the elementary/middle school levels, 21% of African American students are below proficiency compared to 6% of white students. In reading/language and writing the percentages are 18 and 5 respectively. The high school data are similar with 34% of African American students below proficiency in mathematics compared to 10% of white students and 14% compared to 2% in reading/language and writing. This achievement gap has serious implications for college access for students.

To address this gap, the University of Memphis, its Benjamin Hooks Institute for Social Change, and the three primary school districts in the metropolitan area (Memphis City Schools, Shelby County Schools, and Fayette County Schools) recently collaborated to form the Achievement, Confidence and Excellence (ACE) Academy. In addition, a few students from the region (including Mississippi and Arkansas) participate in the program.

The ACE Academy in Memphis

The University of Memphis is a metropolitan university with a strong urban focus. This mission is articulated at every organizational level from the Tennessee Board of Regents through faculty and program development. It is also institutionalized at the university level through its Access and Diversity Goal which articulates a strong commitment to equity in education on campus and in the greater metropolitan area. The ACE Academy is offered through the Benjamin Hooks Institute housed at the University of Memphis. The director of the Institute coordinates the ACE Academy. Funding sources include grants, endowments, philanthropic donations, and individual contributions.

ACE operates as a Saturday Institute with classes and activities held twice monthly during the academic year on the university campus. It serves about three hundred seventh to twelfth grade students a year and targets African American students in the Memphis and Delta region. The program was recently expanded to include students displaced by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita from New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. Teachers are drawn from Hooks Teaching Fellows (university faculty and students) and also include visiting scholars and community filmmakers, historians, and civic leaders.

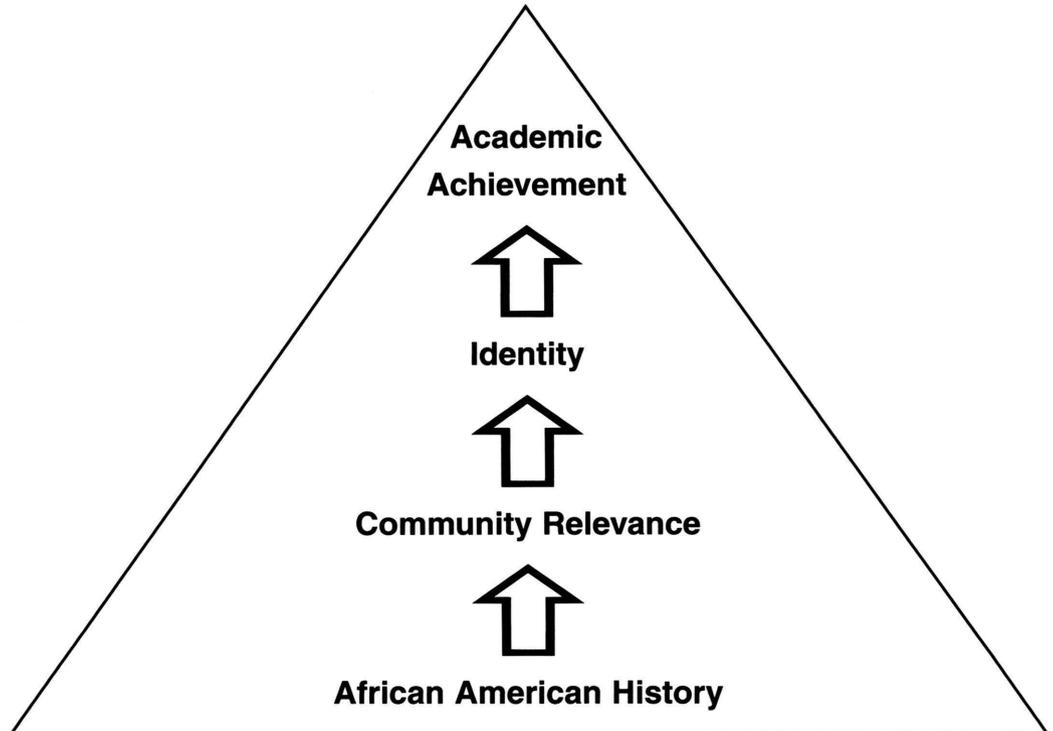
The ACE Academy is grounded in the construct of culturally-relevant pedagogy as a powerful tool to support academic achievement. “We seek to make a connection to African and African American history and culture within a global context” (ACE Web site). The ACE Academy’s curriculum is designed to assure that students are able to improve (1) their academic skills, (2) their cultural knowledge, and (3) their access to college. During the academic year, the students engage with ACE staff to study their own histories as a context for developing writing, analytical, problem-solving and presentation skills.

The curriculum of the Academy is guided by standards established by the State of Tennessee Department of Education and is designed to help students improve their scores on achievement measures. They learn how to take the ACT and SAT exams, about time management, how to select a major and take notes as part of succeeding in college courses. ACE programming includes classes, seminars, and engagement with multiple generations of African American community leaders, scholars, and nationally acclaimed role models such as Benjamin Hooks, Charles Payne, and Patricia Williams. In general, students learn how to access and successfully complete college.

A Grassroots Interpretation of History and Culture as the Foundation for Academic Achievement and College Access

The ACE curriculum allows inquiry into the ways in which the teaching of African American history and culture can facilitate high school students' mastery of traditional academic subjects. Initial interviews with parents and program staff suggest that the African American history and cultural knowledge learned through the ACE curriculum has assisted students in connecting their history to academic content knowledge and increased their desire to achieve at higher levels in school and to continue on to college.

The relationship between the ACE curriculum and academic achievement is being explored and is illustrated in the graphic below.



Parents and staff engaged with the Academy report that as the youth learn about their own histories and culture, they engage more with their own communities—which aids them in understanding and accepting their own identities. Each of these factors contributes to the students’ belief that they can achieve academically. As one parent noted, “Now that our children are learning more about their history, they are starting to transfer that history to their current lives and our community.” Another parent commented that learning about their own history “helped the children to see what ordinary people can do.”

The ACE curriculum has also helped to connect the community to student learning, creating a “shared responsibility” for helping students learn more about a culture and history not being taught in the public schools. One individual stated, “Teaching the curriculum to the students communicates that we value them by choosing to teach them about themselves. This seem[s] to empower the students.” A parent stated that the students had begun to “ask their high school teachers for curriculum like they are learning in the ACE program.”

Both parents and staff viewed this endeavor as positively influencing ACE students’ desire to achieve academically and pursue college. One staff person reported, “The students are experiencing themselves as part of the curriculum, and they want to learn more and to use their reading, writing, and thinking skills to do so.”

Initial feedback regarding the ACE Academy suggests that adding African American history and culture to the curriculum does not merely diversify and enrich it, but also contributes to academic achievement for minority youth. More inquiry is needed in terms of how the curriculum can be further enriched in this regard and the multiple effects of it over time.

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Author Information

Dr. Beverly Cross's scholarship and service focus on urban education, specifically in teacher diversity, urban education, multicultural, and anti-racist education and curriculum theory. She writes about issues of race, class, and culture in urban schools and achievement. Current projects include identifying key urban teacher characteristics and conducting longitudinal research on them, designing urban teacher preparation programs, and articulating urban education partnership strategies.

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